

The Cosmic Myths of Homer and Hesiod

Eric A. Havelock

I

HOMER'S COSMIC IMAGERY

Embedded in the narratives of the Homeric poems are a few passages which open windows on the ways in which the Homeric poet envisioned the cosmos around him. They occur as brief digressions, offering powerful but by no means consistent images, intruding into the narrative and then vanishing from it, but always prompted by some suitable context.

A. *Iliad* 5.748-52 and 768-69

The Greeks in battle being pressed hard by the Trojans, assisted by the god Ares; the goddesses Hera and Athene decide to equalize the encounter by descending from Olympus to help the Greeks. A servant assembles the components of Hera's chariot: body, wheels, spokes, axle, felloe, tires, naves, platform, rails, pole, yoke are all itemized in sequence, comprising a formulaic account of a mechanical operation: Hera herself attaches the horses to the car. Athene on her side is provided by the poet with a corresponding "arming scene"; she finally mounts the chariot and the two of them proceed:

748 Hera swiftly with whip set upon the horses
749 and self-moving the gates of heaven creaked, which the seasons kept
750 to whom is committed great heaven and Olympus
751 either to swing open the thick cloud or to shut it back.
752 Straight through between them they kept the horses goaded-and-driven. . .

768 Hera whipped up the horses, and the pair unhesitant flew on
769 in midspace between earth and heaven star-studded.

B. *Iliad* 8.13-27

Zeus commands the gods in council to observe neutrality in the war; any disobedient member will be severely punished:

13 I will seize him and throw him into Tartarus gloom-ridden
14 far away, where deepest abyss under earth pertains.
15 Then-there (are) the iron gates and brazen threshold
16 as far the remove beneath Hades as heaven stands removed from earth.
17 Then you will all understand by what remove I stand strongest above all
gods.
18 Try it out if you want to, ye gods, that you may all know.
17 Suspend a golden rope from heaven
19 and all of you gods and goddesses catch hold of it.
20 You still could not pull down from heaven to earth
21 Zeus, counsellor supreme, strain though you might many times,
22 but what time I myself should put my mind to it and decide to pull,
23 I could pull you up plus earth itself plus sea itself,
24 and next the rope round Olympus' peak
26 I would tie, and all (things) would turn into what is up above.
27 So far the remove by which I stand superior over gods and stand superior
over mankind.

C. *Iliad* 8.478-86

The episode narrated in A is repeated three books later in identical language but omitting the description of the chariot-assembly. This time, however, Zeus disapproves of the goddesses' mission, so it is cancelled, and he inveighs against Hera:

477 . . . as for you, I reckon nothing of you
478 angry as you are, not though you should betake yourself to the bottom-most
borders
479 of earth and deep-sea, where Iapetos and Kronos
480 are seated unrefreshed by either rays of the Hyperion sun

481 or by winds and deep (is) Tartarus on either side
 482 not though you get as far as that in your vagrant wandering, do I for you
 483 skulking as you go give a thought, for than you is nothing more bitchy.
 484 So he spoke, white-armed Hera gave no answer
 485 And now the bright light of Helios fell into Ocean
 486 drawing black night across the grain-giving fields.

D. *Iliad* 15.162-67

Zeus had been temporarily overcome by sleep, during which his purpose to allow the Greeks to be worsted in battle is suspended as it had been once before. Poseidon, Zeus' brother, takes the opportunity for a second time to intervene on the Greek side, and the tide of battle is reversed. Zeus, awaking, instructs intermediaries to order his brother's withdrawal:

162 If he will not offer obedience to what I say but instead discount it
 163 he had better ponder thereafter within his wit and spirit
 164 lest strong as he may stand he may not have nerve to await my coming against
 him,
 165 since I can assert myself to stand above him
 166 and prior in generation. Forsooth his heart presumes so far
 167 as to assert equality with me, whom even others shudder before.

These last three lines, which recall an earlier claim on Zeus' behalf made by the poet himself (*Iliad* 13.355), are then repeated almost verbatim (*Iliad* 18.181-83) during the transmission of Zeus' instructions.

E. *Iliad* 15.187-95

Poseidon responds in kind; the messenger pleads; he replies:

187 Three brothers are we born of Kronos and Rhea
 188 Zeus and myself and last of us Hades ruler of the buried ones.

189 Three ways have all been apportioned, each has his share of status.
 190 I for my part obtained of the shaken lots to inhabit forever the grey salt sea;
 191 Hades obtained the dark gloom-ridden;
 192 Zeus the wide heaven in the aether and the clouds;
 193 Earth remaining is common to all, and also tall Olympus.
 194 Therefore I need not the wits of Zeus to rule my life by; rather at ease
 195 let him remain in his third share though standing strongest.

F. *Iliad* 20.56-65

Reversing policy once more, Zeus in council announces to the gods that they may choose sides and join in the fighting. They accordingly get involved:

56 Terribly thundered the father of gods and men
 57 from on high, while far below Poseidon shook
 58 the unbordered earth and the steep mountain summits,
 59 and all the feet of well-watered Ida quaked
 60 and the hill-tops and Trojan city and the Achaean ships.
 61 From beneath, Aidoneus lord of the buried ones was affrighted,
 62 and in his fright sprang from his seat and shouted, for fear that above him
 63 Poseidon the earth-shaker may break open the earth
 64 and his house might be exposed to mortals and immortals,
 65 horrible, dank-ridden, which even gods shudder before.

G. *Iliad* 21.190-99

In a confrontation between Asteropaeus and Achilles on the battlefield, their lineages are compared. Asteropaeus had announced himself as grandson of the river Axios “wide flowing” (an epithet thrice repeated). Achilles astride his victim’s body rejoins that he is the great-grandson of Zeus:

190 Therefore as Zeus (is) stronger over seaward-murmuring rivers
 191 so is Zeus’ generation made stronger over a river.
 192 To be sure, you indeed have a river at your side, if indeed it can at all

193 protect you. But no; there is no way to fight against Kronian Zeus.
 194 Beside him not even lord Achelous may match himself
 195 nor even the great strength of deep-flowing Ocean
 196 from whom indeed all the rivers and all the sea
 197 and all springs and deep wells flow.
 198 Yet he too is frightened at the bolt of great Zeus
 199 and the terrible thunder-clap when from heaven it explodes.

H. *Odyssey* 10.80-86

Odysseus' narrative of his adventures continues:

80 Six days long we sailed nights and day alike,
 81 on the seventh we came to Lamus' steep citadel,
 82 even Telephylos of the Laestrygonians where herdsman to herdsman
 83 gives call, the one driving in, the other calling back as he drives out.
 84 Then-there an unsleeping man would earn double wages,
 85 one for tending the oxen, one for pasturing silvery sheep:
 86 For nigh at hand are the pathways of night and of day.

J. *Odyssey* 10.508-17

Circe, complying with Odysseus' plea that he be allowed to leave her and sail homeward, informs him of a prior voyage he must take to Hades to obtain a divination from the prophet Teiresias. She then adds sailing directions. He is to sail before the north wind:

508 But whensoever in ship through Ocean you traverse
 509 then-there (is) a waste shore and groves of Persephone
 510 and black poplars tall and willows fruit-shedding.
 511 Beach ship thereon over against Ocean deep-eddying
 512 and yourself pass into the hall of Hades dank-ridden.
 513 Then-there into Acheron flow Puriphlegethon
 514 and Cocytus, which is-a-break-off from water of Styx,
 515 and a rock and conjunction of two rivers loud-roaring;
 516 Then-there, my man, draw close-to-touching, even as I bid you
 517 and dig a trench as about a cubit from there to there. . . .

K. *Odyssey* 11.13-22

The voyage is duly undertaken:

13 And the ship came to the borders of deep-flowing Ocean.
 14 Then-there are the deme and city of Cimmerian men
 15 in gloom and cloud enshrouded, nor ever upon them
 16 does Helios the Shiner cast vision with his rays,
 17 neither when he climbs up into the starry heaven
 18 nor when back to earth from heaven he turns down.
 19 Night the Destroyer instead spreads out over miserable mortals.
 20 Then-there we came and beached, and took out the sheep
 21 while ourselves we went along the flow of Ocean
 22 till we came to the space that Circe had signified.

The components of these items are various and invite some comparisons:

Item A portrays an earth and a heaven separated by intervening space as a common-sense notion. Heaven is prefigured in architectural terms, as a palace with gates that creak as they open and shut to admit a vehicle, but which illogically become also a cloud behaving in the same way. A connecting link between these disparate images is provided by a third image of the Seasons as gate-keepers. The poet's vision sees the sky alternately clear and covered in the cycle of summer and winter, rain and shine, and seeks to make this cosmic sequence understandable in terms of a familiar domestic operation.

B makes two advances on A. Repeating the obvious theme of a space separating heaven from an earth to which sea is added, heaven is now identified as an area comprising "what is up above" (*meteôra*), formally distinct from earth plus sea. To this scheme is now added Tartarus as an abyss beneath the earth (and so by definition not available for inspection) which like heaven is imagined in architectural terms and supplied with its own gates and threshold, whose metallic nature may be intended to suggest how formidable they are. The atmosphere of this place suggests that of an underground cave or dungeon. For the future development of speculative thought, there is some significance in the fact that two sets of images, supernal and infernal, combined to form a symmetrical total in which heaven and Tartarus are

equidistant from a center, though whether in this center earth and Hades (not otherwise described) are combined or separate is left unclear.

C, instead of separating Tartarus from earth, offers a connection between them, so far as Tartarus is located at the lowest part of earth and of sea—a remote boundary but still a boundary. It is sunless and apparently windless (the sense of the Greek is not quite clear) and has two inhabitants known otherwise as Titans, possibly seated prisoners. The place, however, is visitable by Hera if she wants to get away.

E envisions a cosmos on different lines as divided into three equal areas in a tidy tripartite scheme: first, heaven, including daylight and cloud; second, sea; and third, “the dark.” This leaves earth unaccounted for, and also rather surprisingly Olympus, viewed as distinct from heaven. These two, earth and Olympus, are “common ground,” shared as a dwelling place by all the gods from whose standpoint as persons competing for living space the whole construct is offered (another hint of an architectural approach to cosmology). Tartarus is ignored.

F essentially is a narrative of the effect of two concurrent events, a thunderstorm and an earthquake, prefigured as the actions of two gods, which as they are described occur in the visible territory of Troy land. The actual victim of earthquake is also described as earth as a whole, now lacking borders, and with earth is involved what is “beneath” the earth, an abode of the dead envisioned in architectural terms as a domicile possessing that dungeon-like atmosphere elsewhere assigned to Tartarus, a place no god would now want to visit. Earth covers it like a protecting roof which could be broken apart.

G is not interested in cosmic architecture. It merely identifies by name a common source for all water on and under the earth, salt or fresh. The name *Okeanos*, whatever its origin, is obviously not equivalent to what we mean by an “ocean.” Its location is not specified, but it has a deep “flow” which suggests an image of fresh water rather than salt, consistent with its designation elsewhere in Homer as a “washing place” and as a “river.” Otherwise, the passage has relevance to an important aspect of Hesiod’s theology (to be noticed below) rather than to his cosmology.

In H, cosmic architecture is replaced by a location on a primitive map—a far country, pastoral, and, it would seem,

peaceful, where field hands earn a daily wage by herding in sheep and cattle at night and releasing them at the next daybreak. But in this land daybreak comes so very quickly that a herdsman passes and hails his alternate going out even as he goes in. Is this a poetic echo of reports of conditions in the Shetlands, “land of the Midnight Sun”? If so, the incredible is treated with a touch of humor. But what is to be made of the quite inconsistent but haunting image in the last line of the paths of night and day? Is their proximity one that exists between equals, as the symmetry of the formula seems to imply (and as would be true at the equator; Odysseus has been carried before the North Wind) or are these the paths taken by the adjacent herdsman, and if so, should not night practically disappear? The lines make up in magic what they lack in logic. Both Hesiod and Parmenides were to find the magic irresistible and amended the logic.

J again is not strictly cosmological, though it does introduce Hades once more as a house. The architectural motif recurs, reminiscent of the dungeon-like description of Tartarus, but in company with an image of a quite different sort, a rocky forbidding landscape intersected by menacing rivers and reached by a new route.

In K, however, Hades, rather than being obscurely buried beneath the earth, lies adjacent to a land on the earth’s surface occupied by mortal men, a remote but urban people, who live either on this side of Ocean or the other—it is hard to be sure which, nor again is the location of Ocean specified. They live in that kind of perpetual night elsewhere allotted to Tartarus or Hades. The narrative later refers to an “Erebus” situated below a pit dug in a desolate spot of this land, and apparently the equivalent of Hades.

These eight contributions to a Homeric architecture and geography of the physical cosmos contain obvious incoherencies. How can a cloud become a gate and “creak” (A)? Is Tartarus to be envisioned as an abyss below the earth or as a place lying below and beyond an abyss (B)? or at the borders of earth (C)? and is Hades conjoined with earth or separate from it (B)? Is Tartarus in an alternative scheme to be eliminated altogether, being replaced by Hades (E and F), even though Hades and Tartarus are elsewhere distinguished from each other (B)? Why should Zeus (D) share with Hades (F) the distinction of being repellent even to gods? Does earth have borders (C) or no borders

(F)? Where does the added cosmic item “Ocean” fit in, of unspecified location (G) but reachable by ship (K)? The paths of day and night (H) might be expected to have some connection with the cloud-gates of heaven (A). But do they? Is the perpetual night of Hades (E and F) shared by a population on the earth’s surface (K)?

It is of course a mistake to seek for or expect reconciliation of such confusions and contradictions. These are not organized accounts of a physical environment consistently conceptualized. Each is an “episode,” not a static description of fixed relationships, and each is separately imagined, not thought of in relation to an overall system. The cause of this goes back to the genius of orally preserved speech, which requires that reflections of any kind upon the human or cosmic condition be incorporated in the narrative context. The various contexts supplied for these nine descriptions reveal that four of them (B, C, D, E) are spoken by gods in the first person while arguing with other gods, one (G) by a hero in the first person arguing with an opponent, one (J) by a goddess in the first person giving a hero his voyaging directions, one more (K) by the hero himself in the first person narrated by the poet himself, but even these report previous decisions of gods. In sum, description occurs as it is prompted by and occurs within the actions or speech of agents in the story—in this case divine ones (for even the last instance supplies a rendition of previous divine directives). These can all fairly be seen as instances of what has been called the “god-apparatus” used as a device to record cosmological “facts” in memorizable form.

For example, in A the Greeks are retreating, a fact which naturally prompts their allies Hera and Athene to help them, which means an exit from Olympus, and so the architecture of the exit comes up for brief description. Zeus, however, later vetoes their intervention in an appropriately menacing speech which threatens what he will do to them—and this is where he will send them if they are disobedient—and so a brief description follows. All eight passages occur within this kind of contextual pattern. Essentially they are brief digressions sustained and carried along by the sweep of the story. As the prompting contexts are various, so are the details of each digression.

The same rule of narrativization requires that the digressions themselves become not descriptions formally conceived but little episodes of action to which descriptive detail is attached

incidentally. We are not told that heaven is so constructed as to have gates which open and shut according to the seasons and weather, but only allowed to see the gates swinging open under the supervision of permanent gate-keepers, while a car passes through on a given occasion. The intention of Zeus' threatening speech is not informative; he merely invokes Tartarus as a weapon of terror and gets so worked up as to taunt and challenge his council to a duel with himself—a tug of war—which will occur between heaven and earth, thus leading incidentally to a brief reference to the cosmic relationship between the two. All examples can on analysis be seen to be of this character.

In sum, they constitute a series of images, disparate yet loosely connected, for we become aware that they are all “visions” of the circumambient environment, selectively imagined with features that vary according to the requirements of the surrounding narrative, in which they themselves become little narratives also.

It needs no close observation to realize that the verbs employed describe actions or intentions of particular agents rather than those fixed relationships which would be characteristic of formal description. This is completely true of A, and mostly true of B (except for the statement “abyss pertains” and “then-there [are] gates”) and of C (except for a “deep [is] Tartarus”) and wholly so of D, E, F, G, and of H and J (except for “near are the pathways” and “there is a waste shore”). The presence of a syntax of action in narrative discourse is not of course surprising. But it is noteworthy how in Homeric discourse this preference infects—if that is the best word—other elements of the vocabulary besides the verbs. “Self-moving” (A) translates the Greek *auto-matoi*, which does not mean “automatically” in a mechanical sense; the gates are “alive,” spontaneously responding to the direction of gate-keepers, to whom the whole heaven has been “committed,” not as an act of bureaucratic assignment, but “turned over” (*epi-tetraptai*) by an act of personal decision (by Zeus). “Goaded-and-driven” (A) is a translation which uses the device of hyphenation to render the dynamic force of a compound adjective (*kentrênekees*: goad-enduring) which summons up the (unstated) image of the whip incessantly applied to gain speed. This quality of the language is often concealed in the translation, not least because the Greek original is polysyllabic and so phonetically

extended in pronunciation, forcing the original listener to call up the complex moving image while the translated word in European tongues is often as not phonetically curt. So also “star-studded” (A) renders a participial form *astero-enta* which means more than simply “starry.” “Gloom-ridden” (B and E) represents a similar type of formation, *êero-enta*, which does not mean just “gloomy,” but calls up the image of the *aêr* swirling through the area. “Un-bordered” (F) represents a five-syllable word *a-peiresiên*, even the sound of which conveys the sense of a prospect stretching beyond ken. “Well-watered” (F) inadequately renders the Greek *polu-pidakos* which refers to a multiplicity of springs, not so much a “large number of such” as springs multiplying over the location. The semantic stress does not fall on an abstract arithmetic count. “Dank-ridden” (F and J) represents *eurô-enta*, two heavy spondees, again participial in form; the place is not just “dank” but atmospherically permeated. “Seaweed-murmuring” (G) represents *hali-murêentôn*, a compound of noun and participle. The two heavy spondees, terminating the word and the hexameter in which they are placed, call up the image of the steady ceaseless seaward flow of all the rivers of the world: the word constitutes a dynamic statement. “Deep-flowing,” like “deep-eddying” (G and J: *bathu-rheitao*, *bathu-dinê*) achieve the same kind of effect by compounding an adverb with a participial form. “Fruit-shedding” and “loud-roaring” (J) are of kindred shape and semantic significance.

The significance is not a matter of mere stylistics. To be sure, compounding of epithets remains a standard device of archaic and high classical Greek poetry, preeminently in Aeschylus, and was revived in Alexandrian imitation. But while in the latter case it is proper to treat it as a decorative embellishment, its original usage reveals a way of experiencing the world (rather than thinking about it) which is specific to preliterate Greece. One can say that this world tends to be perceived kinetically, as things-in-motion, rather than as objects possessed of determinate properties. The language used to describe this experience is itself kinetic, a term which will recur in our subsequent account of Preplatonic philosophical language. It becomes applicable not just to verbs but to nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

The usage of the Greek adverb *entha*, translated by hyphenated “then-there” (B, H, J, K) is a case in point. The

meaning of the term—its references—hovers between these two English adverbs, the senses of which a sophisticated experience would keep apart. The Homeric mind's eye moves on from one episode to another which comes next in time, that is, in the time of the narrative. As it does so, it also moves within physically perceived reality to that location which comes "next" in space: the word "next" indeed retains in English some of this ambivalence between temporal and physical succession. As the spatial sense becomes reinforced at the expense of the temporal, we move closer to the notion of a spatial cosmic structure replacing a temporal story or myth (*muthos*). This transition of the mind moves parallel to the transition from orally preserved discourse to those literate formulations characteristic of systematic discourse. A conceptual framework replaces the myth. Hesiod, as will appear, exploits this adverb to the point where it begins to take on the clothing of systematic description. But the change is incipient only. It will take the endeavor of all the Preplatonic thinkers (Socrates included) to force the passage from story to structure, to reorganize the language in which we describe our experience of the world and of ourselves so that it can identify stable mental objects having identifiable properties. When Plato turns upon the language of poetry and condemns it as a language of action (*praxeis*) rather than idea, the transition has been accomplished.

And yet, if the above is taken as a portrait of the oral mentality and the manner of its discourse, the portrait is incomplete. Literate successors who were to create the language and the mentality of philosophy and science did not create *ex nihilo*. They had to build on what was given in the oral discourse as this became written down, and there was something to build on. One can begin with the Homeric primacy of Zeus, in terms not of religious belief or theological system, of which the oral mentality was innocent, but of a vision, if that is the best word, of a controlling superagent, superior in status and power to all the other agents in the divine and cosmic apparatus. The moral quality of his action is not pertinent, is indeed irrelevant to his primary feature, which is simply to exercise political overlordship, in the last resort unchallengeable, and so to impose a rudimentary political structure upon the cosmos, actually expressible in a kind of physical measure: "Such is the distance by which I am prevalent over gods and am prevalent over mankind" (B). There has been a tripartite *dasmos* or apportionment of cosmic areas (E)

between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, but in fact, the latter two are Zeus' subordinates (D); this particular Homeric Zeus-formula, asserting the authority of primogeniture, with explicit denial of equality, actually occurs three times in the *Iliad* (D) and, though the story by narrating Poseidon's temporary defiance (E) creates a moment of suspense at the prospect of the rule being abrogated, it is only temporary. In fact, the measure of Zeus' predominance is extended further. Not only his brothers (D) but also the powers prior in generation to him are now his unquestioned subordinates (G). Cumulatively, in these brief cosmic visions, a world of mobile and dynamically shifting phenomena is reduced to a political order under a dominant authority.

In parallel with this political picture, there intrudes from time to time a language which briefly envisions the all as an all, a whole, a total, in an act of integration symbolized in the term *panta*, "all things" (B: cf. also G; it is a mistake to dismiss this usage as commonplace), and symbolized also in statements indicating cosmic symmetry (B, E, F). The pattern may vary, but not the notion that a pattern is there, which is also implicit in the presence of cosmic boundaries of one sort or another. The language of B includes one term of special interest, "the-up-above" (*meteôra*: the Greek anticipates the later "meteorology") or "the (things) suspended aloft," in Homeric contradistinction to the earth. By the fifth century, this word had passed into popular currency, paired along with the phrase "the-underearth" (*ta hupo ges*), to identify the subject matter of physical science. "The under-earth" in Presocratic cosmology took the place of the Homeric area designated as "from beneath" (F line 61; cf. line 57), namely, the Hades from which ghosts could emerge to be revived (K). The earth between Hades and heaven is represented as shared territory "common to all" (E). Speculative versions of these two notions, of revivification and of the existence of a "universal common" (*xunon pasi*) will be seen to reappear in the cosmology of Heraclitus. Applying a similar notion of consolidation, the poet envisions a common source for all forms of water (F), possibly furnishing the hint upon which Thales built the more ambitious proposition of a cosmic water as the source of all things. Characteristically, the Homeric notion is expressed kinetically and personally: "from whom all. . . flow."

The cosmic status of Zeus, considered as a means by which the poet's discourse endeavors to suggest the existence of a cosmic

order, is implemented by the crude means of physical force. He can terrify; he can commit bodily assault; he can hurl a weapon. But his portrait contains a hint that there exists a dimension of his power which is more sophisticated. He is “supreme-counsellor” (A: *hupatos mêtôr*). The formula recurs in the *Iliad*, and it has a variant “counsellor-Zeus” (*mêtietia Zeus*) which is even commoner. The epithet (and its companion verb) carries the senses of skill and cunning, advising and planning. Is this the ultimate means by which Zeus exercises power? Poseidon says (E) “I do not need Zeus’ wits (*phrenes*) to rule my life by,” putting emphasis on the mental processes available to the supreme god for purposes of control. As will appear, it is precisely this distinctively Homeric attribute of god-head which Hesiod will in his turn choose to exploit and which will in the Presocratics undergo transformation into a cosmic intelligence, source of an order within which phenomena are coordinated. By an act of cosmic projection, they translated the human mind into the cosmos, as it were by a Hegelian effort. It was left to Parmenides clearly to grasp the truth that the dimensions of this mind lie in the human thought processes.

Summing up, one must issue a last warning. Historians of early Greek thought are always prone to fall into the unconscious assumption that the conceptual discourse of description, which is not visible in the preserved discourse of Greek oral society, was nevertheless already there in place, available to early poets if they had chosen to use it (but of course, being poets, they did not); and therefore that it is a legitimate historical exercise to interpret and understand early cosmology by the light of this conceptual program, either over-praising early Greek thought for its supposed success in approximating to conceptuality, or evaluating it as “primitive” for its failure to do so. The control exercised by such presuppositions prevents a perception of the intensity of a struggle about to be undertaken to emancipate language from its poetic constraints in order to achieve such a program. For the philosopher of today doing his own thinking, it is precisely in the realization of this early historical struggle that he can gain fresh insight into the sources and manner of his own thought processes.

II

HESIOD'S COSMIC ARCHITECTURE

The *Theogony*: 717-817

Our text of the *Theogony* consists of 1022 hexameters. The passage under consideration comprises almost one-tenth of the whole, and occurs at a point where seven-tenths have already been completed. It interrupts a genealogy of gods interspersed with narrative episodes of varying lengths, replacing these with what could be roughly described as an architecture of the physical world or “cosmos” (the word however in this sense is post-Hesiodic). This is true despite the fact that much of the imagery is concentrated upon the underworld. The phenomena there pictured are continually related to the structure above them. At the conclusion of the passage, the poem reverts to its prevailing style of genealogy and narrative.

We are not, however, dealing with an insertion by another hand. More than once in these hundred lines, the architectural syntax lapses and reverts, either to genealogy (746, 758, 776; these are brief) or to a syntax of personal agents performing cosmic actions (734-35, 746-48, 769-74, 780-86, 792-805) in a manner consistent with Hesiod's style otherwise, in both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*.

The composition is unpracticed, as though the author knows he is wrestling with a problem with which his previous bardic training has given him no familiarity. So both theme and scene of what is being described keep shifting, as focus moves from physical space unconfined to a prison with walls, fences, gates, and warders, from Tartarus to Night to Hades, from Night and Day to Sleep and Death, from Death to Hades, from Hades to Styx, from Styx to Ocean and back again to Tartarus, from Tartarus to gates, from gates to prison (ring-composition). In our translation, the frequent and often repetitive subdivisions or “versions” into which the passage has been cut up convey the kaleidoscopic effect of the composition, with one image replacing another image yet overlapping with it.

Version I: *Cosmic Symmetry*

717 And the Titans down under the earth wide-wayed

718 were taken (sc. by the three giants) who in bonds of affliction bound them
 719 having with their hands overcome them even though over-weening they
 proved-to-be (*eontas*)
 720 as far down below under earth as heaven stands (*esti*) far away from earth;
 721 that far indeed (is the distance) away from earth towards Tartarus gloom-
 ridden.
 722 Nine nights and nine days a brazen anvil
 723 from heaven descending on the tenth to earth would reach;
 724 and nine nights and nine days again a brazen anvil from earth descending
 725 on the tenth to Tartarus would reach.

Version IIa: *The Cosmic Prison*

726 Around this a brazen fence runs driven on either side of it.

Version IIIa: *Cosmic Night*

727 in three rows is spread around the neck
 And night

Version IVa: *Cosmic Roots*

728 Moreover up from below
 are roots of earth implanted and roots of the unharvested sea

Version Va: *Cosmic Space*

729 And then-there the Titan gods under the dark gloom-ridden
 730 stay-hidden by the counsels of Zeus the cloud-assembler
 731 in a space dank-ridden at outermost-edge of giant earth

Version IIb (enlarged): *The Cosmic Prison and Warders*

732 For them there-is (*esti*) no egress; Poseidon has imposed (a barricade of)
 doors
 733 of bronze, and a wall runs driven round from side to side
 734 and then-there Gyges, Kottos, and Briareus of high-spirit
 735 do dwell, trusty warders (servants) of Zeus the aegis-bearer

Version IVb (enlarged): *Cosmic Springs and Borders*

736 And then-there of earth the dusky and of Tartarus gloom-ridden

- 737 of deep-sea unharvested and of heaven star-studded
 738 of all in succession do the springs and borders obtain (*easin*)
 739 distressful, dank-ridden, that even gods shudder before

Version Vb (enlarged): *The Cosmic Chasm*

- 740 a great-big chasm, nor through (the space of) a whole consummate year
 741 would (one) reach the floor, if once (one) should find himself inside the
 gates.

Version VI: *The Cosmic Gale*

- 742 Nay, there, and then-there, would gale before gale carry (him)
 743 distressfully; a frightful prodigy even for the immortal gods
 744 (is) this.

Version IIIb (enlarged): *Cosmic Night*

- And frightful the house of Night the obscure
 745 (that) is-there-established in clouds enshrouded inky-black

Version VII: *Cosmic Personification*

- 746 Further on before these does Iapetos' child hold up broad heaven
 747 standing-there with head and unwearying hands (upheld)
 748 unshakable

Version VIII: *Cosmic Exchange*

- where both Night and Day approaching close
 749 speak one to the other exchanging the great-big threshold
 750 of bronze; one of them will descend inside while the other doorwards
 751 proceeds, nor ever the both of them does the house within contain
 752 but always the one of them outside the house remaining (*eousa*)
 753 over-circles earth and in turn the other within the house remaining (*eousa*)
 754 awaits the season of her own journey what time it may come
 755 the one of them for the terrestrial ones holding light many-visioned

756 the other (holding) Sleep in her arms, Death's brother

Version IIIc (duplicated): *Cosmic Night*

757 She, even Night the Destroyer enshrouded in cloud gloomy-formed

Version IX: *Cosmic Sleep and Death*

758 And then-there children of Night the murky keep their dwelling
 759 even Sleep and Death frightful gods nor ever upon them
 760 does Helios the Shiner cast-vision with his rays
 761 either to heaven ascending or from heaven descending.
 762 One of these two over land and sea's broad back
 763 circles-round quiet and gentle upon mankind
 764 but the other has a mind of iron and brazen his heart
 765 and ruthless within (is) his breast; whomsoever he first grasps he holds fast
 766 of mankind, and (is) enemy to the immortal gods as well.

Version X: *Cosmic Hades (and narrative of Dog)*

767 And then-there, further on, the echoing halls of the underworld god
 768 even of powerful Hades and of awesome Persephone
 769 are established, and ahead of them a frightful dog keeps watch
 770 a ruthless (beast) and baneful his skill. Upon those approaching
 771 he fawns alike with tail and both ears (wagging)
 772 but to go out back again he forbids; yes, he watches out
 773 and eats up any whom he catches going out of the gates
 774 of powerful Hades and awesome Persephone.

Version XIa: *Cosmic Styx and Ocean*

775 And then-there does she inhabit, that goddess before whom immortals
 shudder
 776 even Styx-the-shudderful daughter of refluent Ocean
 777 she the eldest; and remote from the gods she inhabits a renowned dwelling
 778 roofed over by great high rocks; and all around
 779 with silver pillars it is conjoined to heaven.

Narrative Digression

780-86 How Iris at Zeus' command administers the oath of the water of Styx to the gods.

Version XIb: *Cosmic Styx and Ocean (resumed)*

787 Full-and-far beneath the earth wide-wayed
 788 from the sacred river it flowed on through black night
 789 (being) a branch of Ocean; and a tenth portion has been allotted (to it).
 790 In nine portions around the earth and the sea's wide back
 791 in silver eddies coiled does Ocean fall into the sea;
 792 but she, the one (portion), flows out of a rock (to be) a great affliction to the
 gods. . .
 806 (Styx's water) discharges (itself) through a rough-and-rugged space.

Narrative Digression

792-805 How a god who forswears himself by the water of Styx suffers a ten-year punishment.

Version IVc (repeat of IVb): *Cosmic Springs and Borders*

807 and then-there of earth the dusky and of Tartarus gloom-ridden
 808 of deep-sea unharvested and of heaven star-studded
 809 of all in succession do the springs and borders obtain (*easin*)
 810 distressful, dank-ridden that even gods shudder before.

Version XII: *Cosmic Gates and Threshold*

811 And then-there (are) both gleaming gates and brazen threshold
 812 unshakable upon far extended roots compacted,
 813 self-implanted.

Version IIc (enlarged): *Cosmic Prison and Warders*

Further on and set apart from all gods

814 the Titans dwell far beyond Chaos the dusky.
 815 Moreover of mighty-blasting Zeus those famed assistants
 816 inhabit halls upon the foundation-roots of Ocean
 817 even Kottos and Gyges.

In these one hundred lines, the logic of literate composition is lacking, and one should not impose it by forced rationalizations and excising of supposed additions. The text as we have it appears to be the one that was familiar to the early philosophers. To seek to find place for supposed interpolators between them and the poet they read and memorized is an exercise in futility.

Yet out of a world made by gods and peopled by them a different vision is struggling to emerge, philosophically positive in its nature. An architecture of coherent space is replacing a genealogy of divine persons whose birth and acts occur in sequence of time. This becomes evident at the beginning in Version I. Heaven and Tartarus are presented as upper and lower limits of a world above and below the earth, within which earth is placed equidistant from each. This hints at a principle of geometric regularity, rendering more explicit what had been implicit in the rhetoric of Homer's Zeus. Alternatively and more frequently, the main components or areas of this world—Heaven, Sea, Tartarus—are assigned a common possession described as “roots” or “springs” or “borders.” This vision is organic instead of geometric, but it points toward a second principle with philosophic implications, namely a common elemental source, what Aristotle would call a “first principle,” for the entire contents of the physical environment. These contents in turn occasionally yield precedence to a description of a larger continuous space or “chasm,” with a hint that they are phenomena which either take place in this space or emerge from it or in some way rest on it. Finally, in an image of the alternating journeys of Night and Day, a passage of rhythmic magic supreme in Greek poetry, the poet proposes a fresh type of symmetry, one of process or balance, in which interacting and opposed phenomena alternately yield place to each other.

In these episodes, a curtain is lifting on the future to reveal the approach of Preplatonic cosmology. The Milesians and their successors lived under the spell thus cast. The thresholds and fences and walls and houses and Styx and Atlas and the Dog and the Giants look backwards; they revert to the speech of the pre-conceptual mind. But it is when we too look back, and grasp what Hesiod is doing to Homer, that we realize the strength of his own forward leap. A series of autonomous images inserted digressively into previous epic narrative have been brought together with some attempt at coordination. Heaven, Earth, Sea, and

Tartarus are principals in Hesiod's vision as Homer's. Night is reproduced in her Homeric roles as on the one hand an autonomous power dreaded by all, on the other an equal partner of Day. The positions of Hades, Styx, and Ocean in the architecture are given subordinate treatment, consistent with the architectural place they occupy in the Homeric narrative (Hades: *Il.* 20.61-65; Ocean, Hades, Styx: *Od.* 10.511-15; Ocean: *Il.* 14.200-1 and 302-3; *Od.* 4.563-68, 11.13, 160-61, 20.64). The gates, thresholds, borders, the dank and gloom are all reproduced from the Homeric apparatus. The Homeric "abyss" and the emphasis on Tartarus' depth and its remoteness are translated into the notion of a cosmic chasm, utilizing a hint provided by the most desperate of Homeric formulaic oaths: "May earth the wide gape open (*chanoi*) for me if. . ." (*Il.* 4.182; 8.150; cf. 17.417). Homer furnishes hints of two different spatial symmetries, one tripartite, retaining earth as the middle term between Heaven and Tartarus; the other quadripartite, setting earth apart as "common ground" not included with Heaven, Sea, and Hades. Hesiod prefers the first (Version I) but shows signs also of remembering the second (Version IV) which has four components, but with Heaven replacing Homeric Olympus. Homer's herdsmen who salute each other where Night and Day pass close are converted into actual Night and Day, and the symmetry of this personal exchange is converted into an architectural one transacted across a threshold. Refluent Ocean at the edge of the earth is given geometric position surrounding it, and an arithmetic relationship to that Styx which in Homer is reached only after crossing Ocean (*Od.* 10.508-15). The Homeric rock associated with Styx is converted into a rock-cave (*Od.* 10.518; *Theog.* 727-28). The Homeric land of the Cimmerians denied the light of the rising and descending Sun becomes the land of Hesiod's Sleep and Death. Many of the components are placed within the architectural composition awkwardly, and geographically disconnected, but they are there.

What is the mental mechanism which sets this proto-conceptual process in motion? The clues to it are linguistic, to be tracked down by observing some of the syntactical devices employed in composition. They are all available in the previous epic language. There is the narrative connective "and then" or "and next," which leads on from one happening to another. The Greek connective is *entha (de)*, which can also mean "and there"; in this overlap of meaning, a time sequence of events merges into

a space sequence of “physical” objects. The rendering “then-there,” despite its English awkwardness, has been used as a translation device to bring out the fact of this transition. A parallel function is performed for Hesiod by the adverb *prosthén*, which carries the meaning of “in front” (of whatever has been recently described) and “further on.” The mind’s eye is moving like a traveller from one image to the next, so that what would have been an event-series in original epic is converted into an area-series. Sometimes the attempt to connect is abandoned. The composer resorts to the epic *autar*, “moreover” or “and next,” which does little more than fill up a metrical gap in the hexameter, in order to introduce the ear to a fresh image.

More importantly, a preference can be shown for replacing epic verbs of action, reporting the activities of agents, by verbs of position, posture, fixity, or status, so that the subjects of these cease to be agents performing actions and become physical phenomena of one sort or another. So we observe a repeated preference for images of imprisonment, fencing in, and verbs of binding and containment (710, 726, 728, 732, 751). Permanence of condition or situation is suggested by the frequent use of the perfect tense in the active, passive, or intransitive voices (727, 728, 730, 732, 733, 745, 747, 769, 789, 791, 812); or by the use of the verb *echô* in the sense of “sustaining” (746, 755, 758, 765); and, most significantly, by the use of the verb “to be” (*einai*) to signify a perpetual or permanent presence (720, 732, 738, 752, 753, 809). It is important to stress the fact that all these are resources already present in the oral epic vocabulary. Conceptualization of language does not occur in a vacuum. It operates by selectivity exercised upon the oral medium, certain elements of which are given preferred expression. The choice does not fall on single words as such, but on preferred syntactical arrangements in which they are placed.

From a philosophical standpoint, these are the positive aspects of the poem. The negative ones are easier to perceive: there is no architectural consistency, different spatial arrangements are superimposed one upon another, and the failure of logical continuity is marked by syntactical disjunction. Eye and ear are invited to jump around, from Earth to Tartarus to Night to Hades to Ocean. There is a prison somewhere, required by the myth of the Titans, sometimes in empty space, sometimes with borders. The “all” is equipped in the same breath with springs (as required

by the all-encompassing sea) and with roots (as required by all-encompassing land). But through the confusion, one can see what Hesiod is trying to do to the Greek mind and it is a fascinating spectacle. The divine agent performing creative acts is yielding place, perhaps reluctantly, to the physical phenomenon which just “exists,” as the reading eye begins to take architectural control over the acoustic flow of the listening ear.

Yale University
(Emeritus)